# FBI Geared for Rosenberg Confession

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If Julius Rosenberg had volunteered a last-minute confession of his espionage activities to save his life in 1953, the FBI was prepared with a minutely synchronized prison plan to encourage his cooperation.

FBI agents were to be hidden in an unused garage 200 yards from Sing Sing's death house on the night of the execution. If Rosenberg had signaled a willingness to talk, word would have been passed in code to the concealed agents, who would then have sped by station wagon to the building housing his cell.

"Julius Rosenberg will be first interviewed in his pre-execution cell," says an FBI memo wired to bureau director J. Edgar Hoover a few days before the execution, "and if ostensibly cooperative will be immediately removed to a cell on the second floor, which is in an unoccupied wing."

The agents were prepared for a long siege. They planned first to put four questions to Rosenberg as a test of his will to talk. (Question No. 1: "Name the individuals who furnished you information to give to the Russians.") If Rosenberg passed the test, the agents had arranged to spend months with him in the death house to extract a confession. Meals and bedding would have been provided by the warden and typewriters and recording equipment would have been moved in quickly.

Julius Rosenberg and his wife, Ethel, never broke, and they went to the electric chair early in the evening on June 19, 1953, still insisting they were innocent.

Their deaths ended the government's fervent, almost obsessive hope for a confession. Records made public by several agencies in the past few weeks show that, from the beginning of the celebrated case, the government hoped the Rosenbergs would crack under conviction and death sentences and lead agents to other spies.

Hoover, for example, believed from the first that an indictment of Ethel Rosenberg might induce Rosenberg to cooperate. In July 1950—after Rosenberg's arrest but before his wife's—Hoover suggested to Attorney General J. Howard McGrath that proceedings be brought against Ethel Rosenberg. If Rosenberg could be induced to talk, Hoover wrote, his confession would open the door to cases against other suspects.

"I feel," Hoover wrote, "that proceeding against his wife might serve as a lever in this matter." Approximately three weeks later, Ethel Rosenberg was arrested and charged with conspiring with her husband to commit espionage.

In the files of the Energy Research and Development Administration, successor to the Atomic Energy Commission, is another memo indicating a confession was high on the list of Justice Department goals in prosecuting the Rosenbergs.

A memorandum from an official in the AEC's Division of Security explains why the Justice Department believed the case was important to national defense.

"The (Justice) department believes if Rosenberg (is) given death sentence and his wife 30 years, he may be inclined 'to talk.' If so, Justice believes others in the espionage ring . . . may be disclosed."

In December 1952, as the initial date for the Rosenbergs' execution approached, the Justice Department's internal security chief, William E. Foley, proposed having government agents handy at Sing Sing to await a confession. Foley named three other pending espionage cases he thought likely to be broken if the Rosenbergs talked.

In 1953, with the Rosenbergs' second execution date approaching, the FBI apparently went to the unusual extent of urging one of its former informants, who had befriended Julius Rosenberg, to beg him to cooperate. The informant was Jerome E. Tartakow, who, before the trial in 1951, had relayed some of Rosenberg's confidences to the FBI. Tartakow, a convicted car thief, had been in a cell with Rosenberg in New York.

In a recent letter to The Washington Post, a man identifying himself as Tartakow recalled that FBI agents visited him shortly before the execution and suggested that he urge Rosenberg to cooperate with them.

Tartakow said he did not ask Rosenberg to "confess his guilt" but suggested he "somehow cooperate with the authorities so that his life and Ethel's might be spared." Tartakow added: "Unlike Julie, I am an ordinary man and the thought of death is frightening to me."

In the final months, a variety of plans surfaced in the government for obtaining the Rosenbergs' confession. An aide to President Eisenhower proposed employing a "Jewish psychiatrist" to "crack" them by psychological persuasion. President Eisenhower was urged by others to commute the death sentences and hope for a confession later.

Less than three weeks before the executions, James V. Bennett, director of the Bureau of Prisons, was

dispatched to Sing Sing to determine whether the Rosenbergs were, as he put it, "'looking for a way out of their allegiance."

Bennett met with both Rosenbergs—separately at first, then together—to, as he says, "open up communications" between them and high officials in Washington, presumably Attorney General Herbert Brownell. The Rosenbergs interpreted his visit as an offer of a "talk or die" deal. Bennett, retired and living in Bethesda, denies that any specific offer was made. Whatever he said was rejected by the Rosenbergs.

On the night of the execution, Bennett was in Hoover's office in Washington, helping to keep what he describes as the "death watch." There was an open line between Hoover and the FBI agents in the garage at Sing Sing.

Bennett described the scene in his book, "I Chose Prison." He indicates that one final effort had been made to induce the Rosenbergs to cooperate. "For two hours we waited in Hoover's office for word on the open line," Bennett wrote. "The Rosenbergs had been told for the last time that, if they spoke out, they might get a stay."

No word came from Sing Sing. A few days later a bill for the Rosenbergs' final expenses came to Bennett's office. It read: "Two executions at $150 each —$300."